

Not Quite a Bond Girl

a Spy-Myeong-Wol-Fanfiction

by *Rodo*

for *idella*

Chapter 1:

IN AH WALKED through the lobby of the company headquarters as if she owned the place. She did, in fact, own it, now that her grandfather was in prison and the board was without its chairman. People stared at her as she passed, and their eyes followed her until the elevator doors closed behind her. She quickly checked her reflection in the mirror one last time. Her dress suit was impeccable; the blouse and scarf matched, of course, but still added enough personality to make sure nobody mistook her for a dull workaholic. She tried on a smile that made her look pleasant and professional, although inside she felt queasy. So much for being a bad actress.

The doors opened and she turned around in one fluid motion. She concentrated on the old In Ah who was always so sure of herself, no matter what she did. She might not have the education and the knowledge to lead the company, but what she had was more important: she had the right to it and if she had to, she could charm any of the old geezers who thought they ruled the world.

The secretary wasn't pleased when In Ah ignored her on the way to the conference room, but In Ah had neither time nor patience for that argument. The conference was already in progress. She opened the door and walked in before the men around the table knew what was happening. The indignant secretary had caught up with her, but didn't dare to speak up in the presence of the directors.

"This is a closed conference," the man at the head of the table said. His name was Kim Ki Ban, head of Development, In Ah recalled.

She put on her smile and looked him straight in the eye. He seemed surprised by that. “Yes, but this is now my company, isn’t it? And isn’t it natural that I should take an interest in it? After all, any decisions made by you will affect my reputation and fortune. So it is not only my right but also my duty to be here.”

“But your grandfather ...”

“My grandfather is in prison for a reason, as much as it hurts me to say that.”

The chairman looked at her and choked as he heard that. Another man rose from his seat and cleared his throat. “But you, Miss Ju In Ah, have no experience running a business. Of course you have the right to know what we discuss and decide here, but that does not mean you will understand it.”

In Ah’s smile widened despite her urge to fight the insult. “That is what you are here for, is it not? I’m sure you will explain everything to me and advise me to the best of your abilities.”

The men looked at each other and didn’t seem sure, but by an unspoken agreement, the vice president left In Ah the chair at the head of the table and proceeded to present the plans for the new hotel in Macao, while the secretary left and closed the door quietly without having said a word.



Retreat was not an option, so In Ah took a deep breath to steel herself before she entered the prison’s visitation room. The white walls of the hallway made her feel claustrophobic and the guard at the door eyed her as she stalked past. She must look as out of place as she felt.

Her grandfather looked the same as always. His surly demeanour hadn’t changed one bit and the prison uniform seemed strangely fitting. For a moment she wondered why she had never seen this side of him – the brutal criminal hiding beneath a tailored suit. Then he looked at her and straightened his back. He didn’t smile, but something made him seem less angry and more like the man who used to dance with her when she was five and fancied frilly pink dresses with glittering red hearts printed on them.

“Hello, Grandfather,” In Ah murmured. She put her handbag on the table and sat down in the wobbly plastic chair. “You wanted to see me?”

Ju Hui Jang attempted a smile, but In Ah thought it made him look like a goblin.

It did not bode well. “Yes,” he said. “My lawyer wants to try to get the charges dismissed. I will be out of here soon.”

“Grandfather ...” In Ah said, but couldn’t find the right words.

“I hope the business is doing well. You’ve kept tabs on the development of the new hotel and talked to the architect, haven’t you? When does he think it will be finished? I want to make sure I can attend the opening ceremony.”

In Ah said nothing. She stared at the white wall at the back of the room and tried to figure out what to say. “Grandfather ...” she finally murmured. “You killed a man. You tried to have Myeong Wol murdered even though Choi Ryu and Kang Woo did what you wanted. You can’t just make that disappear like nothing happened.”

Ju Hui Jang sat up straighter. “Of course I can. Han Myeong Wol and Choi Ryu don’t even exist in this country and everything else can be dealt with.”

In Ah sighed. “I love you grandfather, but you can’t do that. There is line you can’t cross and there are things you don’t do, but you did them anyway. You have to try to make it right somehow!”

“In Ah!”

“I’m sorry, but I think it’s best if I leave. Please think about what I said. Don’t worry about the company, I’ll take care of it,” she told him, and without looking back, she grabbed her handbag and strode out of the room. She heard her grandfather’s indignant reply but couldn’t make out the words; she was too busy keeping her tears at bay until she was out of this place and nobody would see her cry.



In Ah rang the doorbell for the tenth time in about as many minutes. She sighed, tapped her foot and looked at her watch again. It was ten in the morning and while she liked to linger in bed after staying out late, she knew that Kang Woo was far too disciplined to miss his first training session in the morning. He also hadn’t been out late, or out at all, for several days, or she wouldn’t be here.

“Kang Woo!” she screamed and pounded against the door with her fist. She was surprised how much it hurt. “I know you’re in; your manager called me and asked me to come by because you’ve been moping for the last few weeks!” She rang the doorbell again and kept her finger on the button for far longer than was necessary.

It was half past ten when Kang Woo finally opened the door. By that point, In Ah

had been kicking it furiously and was moments away from trying to break one of the windows with her handbag. Ju In Ah was not someone to be ignored.

“What?” Kang Woo grumbled.

In Ah didn't bother to answer and pushed her way past him into the house. There was no way she would let him lock her out now. The house looked as unlike Kang Woo as she had ever seen it. The floor was littered with empty take-out boxes (at least she hoped they were empty) and nobody seemed to have cleaned the place in forever.

“What?” a voice behind her repeated.

“What?” In Ah parroted, “are you serious? What is up with you? I know you miss her, but how can you do this to yourself?” She gestured at the mess around them and the worn out pyjamas he was wearing. He even had a *beard*, for God's sake. “Do you think you are the only one who misses her? Have you thought how her parents must feel? ... co-spies ... you know what I mean. Dae Gang had a bad crush on her and he cried his eyes out until Gyeong Ju was crying along. And what about everyone else, hmm? Do you even think about what your behaviour is doing to your manager and your fans?” In Ah shrieked. She was trembling and it dawned on her that she must look quite unattractive right now.

Kang Woo had let her speak without moving a muscle and still just looked at her as if his usual indifference towards her had been twisted by grief into something like pity.

“Anyway,” she continued, “You don't even have it worse than me. Do you have any idea what I have been going through? And do you see me locking myself in my rooms to wallow in my own grief? No, I'm here trying to get *you* –” she stabbed his chest with her right index finger – “to get over yourself.”

This got a reaction out of him. A sardonic smile tugged at his lips. “And how, exactly, do you have it worse? I just lost the love of my life.”

In Ah snorted. “Yeah? I lost my grandfather – not to death, no, but to his own greed, which is much worse – and now I have to run a company without knowing the first thing about it. And whether you believe me or not, Choi Ryu really meant something to me.”

Kang Woo said nothing. He seemed to consider her words carefully and walked towards the kitchen. When he came back to the living room he held two beers in his hand and motioned for her to sit down on the couch. She did, and took the offered bottle. In Ah hadn't even realised she was thirsty. Screaming so much was hell on her vocal cords.

“I get it, I really do,” Kang Woo whispered. “I just need some time.”

In Ah sighed. “Well, just don’t shut everyone out. Keeping busy helps too, you know? And at least I don’t have to live in a pigsty.” She wrinkled her nose and pointed towards an ominous sticky patch on the table.

“You don’t clean your own house, you have maids for that.”

“So do you. You just have to let them in every once in a while.”

They sat together for a while and talked about this and that – everything but the elephant in the room. It was past midday when In Ah’s phone rang and she had to leave to read some infinitely boring financial report.

“I’ll call Manager Gyeong tomorrow, I promise,” Kang Woo said as she opened the door.

“Do so, please, or else she’s going to bug me again and I am busy enough as it is.”

Kang Woo smiled, and for the first time in weeks Ju In Ah felt truly happy with the job she’d done.



The desk was a mess; folders and papers were strewn across the sleek glass surface in haphazard piles, but In Ah was no closer to finding the design specs from Interior Sun Design for the bar and restaurant that were planned for the ground floor of the new hotel. She had found the design proposals from several other firms, the financial report from the construction company that she had been looking for a few days before and a leaflet from some life insurance company that she could have sworn she had never seen before.

Her phone rang and In Ah’s frown deepened. A quick glance told her that it must be buried under the papers somewhere and it took her four rings to fish it out from under a tan folder full of letters and two binders.

“Ju In Ah speaking,” she answered, hoping that it was important.

“Don’t you sound cheery,” a familiar voice crooned.

In Ah’s frown was giving her wrinkles by now and she could swear she was about to get a headache. “Kang Woo,” she sighed. “Is it important? I am sort of busy.”

She could hear Kang Woo laugh on the other end of the line. “If someone had told me one year ago that you wouldn’t be happy about a call from me, I wouldn’t have believed it.”

“Well, I might not have either, but I am too busy to think about things like that and if I don’t find these files soon I will make a fool of myself in front of the board.” She rummaged through a pile she had gone through before and pressed her phone to her ear with her shoulder.

“Relax, I am just checking in. And I also wanted to tell you some news, but it can wait until later. Have you checked the drawers?”

In Ah snorted. “Of course I checked the drawers. There is nothing left in the drawers, it’s all on my desk.”

“What about the shelves?”

She sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose. Her eyes flicked over to the shelves, which were in a similar state of disarray.

“Okay, I’ll leave you alone. Dinner at eight? We can talk then.”

In Ah nodded, then she remembered that he couldn’t see it. “Yes. There is no way in hell I am going to stay past five.”

“It’s a date,” Kang Woo said, still in an uncommonly cheerful mood. “Good luck and see you later.”

He didn’t wait for her reply and hung up, which suited her just as well. She had a file to find and a conference to attend. She opened the bottom drawer out of reflex and noticed that she evidently hadn’t emptied it yet. The file she was looking for was lying on top, silently mocking her. It was going to be a long day. Hopefully Kang Woo’s mysterious news would improve it.

Chapter 2:

FOR A BRIEF moment after waking up, Choi Ryu felt at peace, thinking he had died protecting Myeong Wol. He remembered the sniper shot, the car swerving off the street and the accident, followed by the smell of hot metal and gasoline. Myeong Wol had been in the seat next to him, her head pillowed on a deflated airbag. She had looked peaceful. Ryu, however, had felt too aware; every sensation had burned itself into his memory as he had scrambled out of the seatbelt and the car, tumbled over to the other side and dragged Myeong Wol out by her arm. In his memory, time had slowed so much that everything had seemed to take minutes, when in reality it must have been mere moments. What had followed then were a stark noise and a powerful blast wave that had thrown both of them on the ground. The heat had burned on his skin, but he'd paid no attention to it and had got up again, shielding Myeong Wol's body, and kept moving.

The memories of the explosion brought back the pain that hadn't registered in his brain before. He groaned, and his jaw and throat rebelled at the movement.

"Don't move," a voice murmured and soft hands pressed against his chest. He complied and tried to open his eyes. The room was dark, what little he could see of it. Most of his head seemed to be covered in bandages. He could just make out Myeong Wol's blurred face – which was unharmed except for a few odd scratches, he noted.

He wanted to ask what had happened to him, where they were, who knew, how long he had been out, the security measures ... but his attempt at a groan convinced him otherwise. He closed his eyes instead and drifted off into an uneasy sleep.



The abandoned apartment building Myeong Wol had found for them leaked. It didn't possess a functioning heater either, but that didn't annoy Ryu as much as the persistent dripping sound from the expanding puddle in the hallway. At least he could move around now, and only his right arm, shoulder and neck were still bandaged up. Myeong Wol made a point of changing the bandages regularly and diligently kept his wounds clean. After all, she owed him her life, she said.

Steps interrupted the monotonous sound of falling drops and Ryu's hand clumsily grabbed the gun on the table in front of him. A moment later Myeong Wol entered the room with one bag of groceries and another with medicine. She wore a baggy hoodie and had her hair tied back. Along with the wide, long skirt, she looked as unlike herself as she could.

"This should be enough for a few days," she explained, a small smile gracing her lips when she saw the gun.

A few more days. Ryu sighed. He was getting restless. Sitting around without doing anything wasn't like him. "We have to talk," he said.

Myeong Wol paused and seemed uneasy, but she didn't disagree. "We have enough time for it anyway. Do you want tea?"

Ryu nodded, more to put her at ease than because he felt thirsty. "We have to consider our options."

A mug of tea appeared in front of him. "Not that we have many," Myeong Wol scoffed. "Our superiors probably think we're dead, but unfortunately so does everyone else. And if we don't want to really be dead, it would be best if they continue to do so."

Ryu agreed and disagreed at once. "We have to find a way to get them to take the kill orders back. That is the only way you can go back to Kang Woo." It was the first time either of them had said his name since the crash. Myeong Wol sat down on the second chair and studied her folded hands. He knew her well enough to know that that was what she wanted more than anything, but that she respected him enough not to ask for it.

"The book was my last bargaining chip," he continued. "The NIS has it now, though." Ryu had thought about this during the time he could barely move the right side of his body and had swallowed pain killers as if they were candy. "I think the first step should be surrendering to them."

This made Myeong Wol sit up and take notice. Ryu could see on her face that she could not believe that he, of all people, had said that. “If we play on their gratitude, maybe we can convince them to let us broker the deal with the North regarding the extraction of the rare earths and ask for a pardon for us in exchange for our silence. After all, we know what lengths our superiors went to when it came to the books.”

Myeong Wol looked more hopeful than she had in a long time, and it made Ryu’s heart beat faster. He hoped it would stop doing that one day. Right now, though, he would do everything he could to make her happy, even sell his own soul.



The meeting took place in an empty warehouse near the docks. Ryu had scouted it beforehand and knew all the exits, hiding places and CCTV blind spots. He arrived early, too, half an hour before the appointed time, and just before the NIS agents. Myeong Wol was waiting outside and kept an eye on the perimeter.

There were two of them, one keeping himself to the shadows, while a young woman walked towards him without trepidation. He had only heard one car approaching, so there were at worst three more men in the immediate vicinity. He and Myeong Wol could take them down if they had to, he decided, and his muscles relaxed a bit.

“You are early,” the young woman remarked.

“So are you,” Ryu shot back.

The woman smiled and held out a hand – a move that made her seem more suspicious in Ryu’s eyes. “It seems I forgot my manners, Yu Da Hae, NIS. And you are?”

“Major Choi Ryu, North Korean Special Forces,” Ryu grumbled. He did not take the offered hand, but Agent Yu seemed unperturbed.

“You do realise, Major Choi, that this confession is enough grounds for me to arrest you for espionage, don’t you?”

Ryu nodded curtly. “I was hoping you would want to hear what I have to say first.”

Agent Yu grinned at that. “I am curious, I admit, as are my superiors.”

“A while ago, the NIS received a digital copy of a decoded version of a set of ancient books containing the locations of several deposits of rare earths. The problem with that is that the locations are both in South and North Korea.”

Agent Yu blinked in surprise. “And you know about this how?”

Ryu shrugged. “I am the one who decoded them and who arranged for you to receive the chip.”

“And why would a North Korean spy do that?”

Ryu took a deep breath. He had tried to find the right words for this moment in the last few days but failed. “Because my colleague needed a pardon to remain in South Korea. She wanted to get married to a South Korean and defect, but not betray her home country. Your side is not wont to leave former North Korean spies alone without a reason.”

Agent Yu evidently did not know what to make of that. It sounded like a poor excuse in his ears as well, even though it was the truth. “That is a touching story, but what is in it for you?”

“What is important is that our former employers threw a wench in both of our plans and now we are hunted by North Korean assassins. And that is a problem you might be able to help us with.”

“Really?” Agent Yu asked. She was still smiling and seemed at ease, but her eyes scanned the darkness of the warehouse behind Ryu for the mentioned colleague and kept a close watch on his hands. “I don’t think we can call off North Korean assassins, sorry to disappoint. And witness protection is not something we can offer out of the goodness of our hearts.”

“No. You can’t. What you *can* do is keep your promise of a pardon for my colleague. You will also need to open negotiations with the North Korean government to mine the deposits effectively and to avoid provoking a war. I can help with that – I know the people involved better than any of your agents. And in exchange, you will add a pardon for the North for my colleague and me to the agenda.”

Agent Yu thought for a moment. “An interesting proposal,” she finally admitted. “But I will have to discuss this with someone higher up in the food chain. You’ll understand, of course.”

Ryu nodded.

“It would be very gracious of you if you would follow me to a safe house while your proposal is being considered ...” she suggested, but Ryu had other ideas.

“Same day, same time, next week.”

Agent Yu sighed, but nodded. “Maybe you’ll bring your ‘colleague’ as well next time. She must be quite the woman.”

Ryu didn’t think that warranted an answer. He just watched as she vanished into

the night. Her partner, who hadn't said a word the entire time, cast a last glance in his direction, telling him that he didn't trust him one bit, and that he should better behave. Ryu snorted imperceptibly, and then he left the building to meet Myeong Wol.



The wedding was beautiful, that much he could tell even from a distance, and Myeong Wol smiled so much that she made the entire world seem brighter. Choi Ryu watched from the shadows and felt sadder than he had expected to. They were all there – Ok Sun, Hui Bok and even In Ah – and they smiled just as brightly. It seemed as if all he had ever wanted was in the one place that he could never enter. He was happy for Myeong Wol, he really was, but he had lost her and everything else. Now, there was nothing left of him.

A movement attracted his attention; In Ah was about to leave, which reminded him of the other thing he came here to do. He carefully took the scarf out of his pocket and put it under the windscreen wiper of her car. Her confession had touched something in him and he hoped his presumed death hadn't hurt her too deeply. This, at least, would tell her that he wasn't dead.

It would be better this way. When he left the scarf he got a good look at the scars that disfigured his arms. Most of the time, he barely remembered that they were there, even when he looked right at them. They reminded him of why it was best that he stayed out of all their lives. They had normal jobs, and normal pasts (or at least normal recent pasts) and friends, while he still owed Agent Yu of the NIS a phone call.

All he knew was being a spy, and her offer had been a tempting one. Although a part of him wanted to forget all of that when he watched as In Ah discovered the scarf and looked around hopefully. Now that Myeong Wol was where she was supposed to be, he didn't have to keep watch anymore. Kang Woo would do that.

He dialled the number that evening. "Agent Yu," he greeted.

"Major Choi, have you thought about our proposal?"

"Yes. As long as I don't have to work on any operations concerning North Korea, I'm in."

She said nothing for a moment, but more for effect than because she actually needed to think about it, it seemed. "Still a bit sentimental, are we? Okay, report at the office tomorrow morning. And don't plan for anything else. It might take a while."

Chapter 3:

CHARITY FUNCTIONS, IN Ah decided, were evil. She had to attend them anyway, which made them a necessary evil, but it didn't make them any less boring, pretentious or sanctimonious. All the people who attended them pretended to care about the cause but in reality they only wanted to be seen caring by the right people. The entertainment was always modest and decidedly non-entertaining and the conversation more boring than she had thought possible. Really, In Ah thought, give her a fashion show any day.

Unfortunately, she was now a CEO and thus contractually obliged to show up at these things and pretend with the rest of them to care about cancer patients, hungry children in Africa or endangered species, while giving away as little money as possible but enough to be deemed generous by others. And, of course, spend the rest of the evening being bored out of her mind while old men tried to impress her as if they were fifty years younger once they had a few drinks.

The charity function for the education of girls in India was no different. It was taking place in the Singapore hotel of her company, which made it damn near impossible for her to weasel her way out of it, and so she had spent the last hour smiling at people and listening to their monotonous lectures on why it was right to donate money to this particular charity when all they really needed to say was "because it will make you look good in front of journalists". By now her feet ached and she was looking forward to dinner.

A few people arrived fashionably late – although why they would want to minimize their exposure to the journalists mingling in the crowd eluded In Ah. It couldn't be because they cared about the cause of the day. In Ah let her eyes sweep over each new arrival, but she didn't recognize any of them. Unremarkable men in unremarkable suits, the lot of them. The last had brought along a couple of unremarkable bodyguards as well.

Maybe it was the boredom that was getting to her, maybe something had caught her eye, but she looked over to the group a second time. The guest greeted the host, smiled charmingly and bowed politely while his bodyguards scanned the crowd. It had been one of them that had made her pause. For a moment she thought it was because he reminded her of Choi Ryu, but a closer look proved her wrong – he *was* Choi Ryu.

He looked over the crowd just like the other bodyguards and In Ah couldn't tell if he'd seen her or not. His face was as impassive as she remembered and it made her heart beat faster, despite the scars she could now see on his neck. She tried to get his attention by craning her neck and peeking curiously in his direction, but he seemed determined not to see her.

His new employer moved away from the host and started to mingle with the crowd, which In Ah took as a chance to satisfy her curiosity. She wanted to know what he did here, and who that man was. A thousand possible answers ran through her mind while she slowly meandered closer to him. It didn't take long until she found herself face to face with him. Choi Ryu didn't even flinch when she stood right in front of him. He swiftly moved aside before she had opened her mouth and found herself faced with his employer.

The man was in his mid-fifties, slightly pudgy and his hair was beginning to thin, but all that paled in comparison when one looked at the decidedly expensive tailored suit with the custom-made golden cuff links that were engraved with something that looked like a fox or dog. He bowed and offered her his hand. "Lee Gang Min, I own the Yellow Sea Shipping company, delighted to meet you."

A year of training in acting like a CEO took over and In Ah smiled and shook his hand, momentarily forgetting about Choi Ryu. "Ju In Ah – this is my hotel. I hope you are finding it to your liking."

Lee Gang Min's smile widened and he nodded. "I am staying here, as it happens. It is the best hotel in all of Singapore."

In Ah acted appropriately pleased with the compliment although she knew the Ritz

was better, no matter what she said in public. In her head, she kept trying to come up with ways to talk to Choi Ryu and ask him all her questions— what had happened to him, why he hadn't come back, how he was, if his feelings for her had changed ...

"I see the dinner is about to begin," Lee Gang Min said. "May I accompany you to your seat?"

And just like that Choi Ryu had vanished in the crowd and In Ah had no choice but to follow Lee Gang Min to a table. The prospect of dinner didn't tempt her at all anymore, much less the three hours of dull conversation she was about to have. Lee Gang Min proved very elusive whenever she tried to find out why he employed bodyguards or even where he came from.



When the event was over, In Ah was so tired she forgot about Ryu and went up to her room in the topmost floor. Or rather, her feet went there and the rest of her simply followed. She shrugged out of her high heels and reached for the light switch, but before she could reach it a hand closed over her mouth while another kept her in place.

"Shhh, it's me," Choi Ryu whispered and In Ah knew she should have known. He never just knocked. She nodded, so he let her go and flipped the switch himself.

In the cold light of the lamps he looked like a fish out of the water. He just stood there and didn't seem to know what to do, and In Ah had to admit that she didn't either. In the end, she settled for, "Hi." What came out of her mouth instead was: "Can't you knock like a normal person?"

He didn't even look mildly ashamed of himself, but In Ah didn't care. She threw her arms around him and hugged him with all her might until tears started to form in her eyes, which brought her back into reality. She let go of him reluctantly and blinked the tears away. He did look embarrassed now. "Do you have any idea what I went through because of you?" she cried with more force than she meant to.

"I'm sorry," Ryu said earnestly, and In Ah knew he meant it, even though he did not understand in the slightest what he was apologizing for. He was such a frustrating man.

"I couldn't get anything out of Myeong Wol either and she must know something. After all, two people don't presumably die in the same car accident and suddenly reappear a year later with one of them knowing absolutely nothing about what happened in between."

“I asked her not to say anything. It’s better that way.”

“Of course it is,” In Ah replied sarcastically. “Why else would people keep telling me it’s better that I don’t know anything about what my grandfather did, about the business funds or anything else. Want me to tell you something? It’s not better that way, at least not for me.”

All of a sudden, her tiredness returned and In Ah shuffled over to the sofa of the suite. Ryu followed her like a silent shadow and sat down on a chair while In Ah flopped down in a manner that she hoped looked at least a little graceful.

“And why are you working for that man anyway? Who is he?”

“It’s ...” Ryu fell silent. “It really is best if I don’t tell you. I *can’t* tell you either. You should stay away from him, though. He’s a dangerous man.”

In Ah closed her eyes in frustration and didn’t open them again. She didn’t think of staying away from Lee Gang Min for one moment. If she did, Ryu would vanish along with him and she was determined not to let that happen. She heard him move and then felt him put a blanket on her before he left. She would not let him go again that easily, but for now, she was tired. It could wait until morning.



The next morning, Ju In Ah felt terrible from sleeping on the sofa, but she hardly noticed. There were more important things on her mind, and her first phone call (well, the second after ordering breakfast and coffee) was to the hotel manager, asking him to check how long Lee Gang Min had booked his room for and which room he had booked.

The answers to her questions arrived before the breakfast. Lee Gang Min had booked a suite on the floor below hers, but only, the manager added somewhat tersely, after he had been assured that there were currently no other occupants on the floor and a hefty sum was paid to ensure it remained so. He intended to stay for a week, or had at least paid for as long, and he liked to have a French breakfast delivered in the morning, which he ate under the watchful eyes of his bodyguards.

In Ah thought for a moment. “Could you send the waiter who generally serves him when he has some free time? And please try to find out what you can about the man.”

The hotel manager bowed slightly. “I already started to make discreet enquiries about him after he insisted to having an entire floor to himself. It seems several of his

ships have been used for smuggling. As soon as I know more, I will tell you, Chairman.”

In Ah nodded and breakfast arrived as the manager left her suite. She ate more or less automatically and savoured the coffee while she considered what to do next. Once she had finished eating, she realised that she did not have the patience to wait for the manager’s call, or anything else for that matter, so she decided to take a direct approach.

The waiter was still busy and In Ah had to intercept him between deliveries, which made him fidgety, since his tips depended on it. He didn’t have much to say about Lee Gang Min. He was very security conscious and valued his privacy, but the waiter had served worse and at least his bodyguards were experienced enough to make the whole ordeal relatively painless.

Frustrated and impatient as she was, In Ah took the lift back to her apartment, checked if the manager had left a message and eventually walked downstairs to face the problem head-on. It did not quite work out as expected and instead she walked into one of the bodyguards, who was professional and polite, but very determined in deterring her from her goal.

“Miss, I am afraid you are on the wrong floor,” he explained patiently, as if she was a little girl that had lost her way.

“No, I am not. This is the floor Mister Lee Gang Min is staying on, isn’t it?” In Ah replied.

The man evidently thought what might have led her to that conclusion and it dawned on her that maybe nobody was supposed to know where he was staying, and so she added: “We met last night at the charity function downstairs; I am the owner of this hotel and thought I might come by and see if everything was to his satisfaction.”

The bodyguard still didn’t seem to be convinced. “Mister Lee does not appreciate disturbances ...”

“Oh please, it’s not as if I want to keep him from anything important. Why don’t we both go down to his room and you can ask if he would like to see me?”

The man shook his head in resignation and sighed. “I can’t leave my post. But you can ask the guard at the door.” And with these words he finally let her walk past.

The hallway looked gloomy, In Ah thought, which it really shouldn’t, but now was not the time to address that issue. The red carpet muffled her steps and the entire hallway was eerily quiet. Maybe she was just not used to her hotels being this empty.

When she passed the corner to Mister Lee's suite the guard at the door tensed and brought his hand close to where In Ah presumed he kept his weapon, so she put on her best disarming smile and presented her open hands.

"Good morning," she piped. "I am here to see Mister Lee. We met yesterday evening – I am Ju In Ah – and I thought could come by. The other gentleman said you might help me. Could you go inside and ask if he has time now?"

This one seemed less weary of unsuspecting young women and after a short pause he nodded and knocked on the door. After a muffled reply from the other side, he related her request to whoever was listening. Moments later steps approached and the door opened to reveal a smiling Lee Gang Min.

"Good morning, Miss In Ah," he said, smiling. "I'm sorry for all the trouble; would you like to come in? I am still having breakfast."

In Ah smiled. "Of course, but I really only wanted to see if there was anything I could do to make your stay more comfortable. This is my hotel, after all, and it is the least I can do after you spent all your time with me yesterday."

Lee nodded enthusiastically. "Oh, really, you mustn't. Spending an evening with such a pleasant young lady is far from a chore. And I really meant it when I said that this is the best hotel in the city. The only thing that could improve my stay here is your company."

In Ah lowered her head and pretended to be quite pleased with the compliment. "Thank you."

"Why, would you like to have dinner with me today?" he asked, and In Ah nodded. "Good, I think it would be best if we ate in my suite – nothing against the restaurant, but this feels more private – one of my bodyguards will pick you up at eight."

"Oh, that isn't necessary. I'm staying on the floor above yours."

"I insist. Choi!" he cried into the depths of the suite. A moment later Choi Ryu materialised behind him with a serious look on his face that betrayed nothing of what he thought. "Would you bring Miss In Ah back to her room?"

Ryu nodded and walked out of the suite, stopping a few steps behind her to wait for her to follow.

"Tonight it is, then," Lee Gang Min confirmed. In Ah bowed slightly while he closed the door.

Chapter 4:

ON THE INSIDE, Choi Ryu sighed. What did it take for Ju In Ah to develop a sense of self-preservation? But another part of him felt warmed by her refusal to stay away from him. He had never met anybody like that; it had always been he who felt drawn to Myeong Wol, who didn't even notice his feelings. On the outside, however, he maintained the carefully schooled façade that had protected him since childhood. Only when they were clear of Lee Shin, the final guard at the stairs, he stopped and turned around.

“What are you doing? Didn't you listen to me?”

In Ah did not seem surprised and shot him a cool look. “I,” she stressed, “am trying to find out what is going on here because *you* won't tell me.”

“I told you –”

“– that this is something spy related you can't talk about, I remember. So? What harm will telling me actually do? I might even be able to help.”

Ryu suppressed another sigh. How to explain that state secrets were secrets for a reason and that knowing them would only put her at risk? “You can't. You weren't trained for this.”

She pouted now and stood, arms crossed, a few steps above him. “No, I wasn't. But I know how to snoop around and that is what I will do this evening when I am meeting Mister Lee for dinner.”

“Don't ...” he started, but she just levelled a look at him. “You don't even know what to look for.”

That hadn't occurred to her yet, so her pout deepened, but Ryu ignored it and walked past her to the door of her suite. In Ah followed him reluctantly and let the last few steps linger. "I won't give up," she stated, staring at the door. "I won't let you vanish again, you stupid fool."

She disappeared behind the door before he had a chance to say goodbye, which was for the better. Using her as an excuse to stay away from the target a bit longer he decided to report the progress of the last few days to Agent Yu, who would no doubt have something to say on the topic of rich heiresses that he did not wish to hear.

As it turned out, she did. "She is right, you know," she pondered through the phone. "She can help."

"You can't possibly mean that," Ryu answered with too much fervour. Agent Yu's knowing silence caused him to grit his teeth. He could practically hear her smirk.

"Not like you think," she admitted. "But as you said, she is going to meet up with Lee this evening anyway. Which means that he will be distracted enough for you to slip away and search his room. This is the best chance we have at finding the chip before he sells it to the Chinese and you know it."

As much as it pained him, she had a point. However, something in his gut told him that things should not go this way, though he couldn't pinpoint exactly why.



As he was the one who had escorted her back to her room, it fell to Ryu to fetch her for her dinner appointment. Lee had insisted. He seemed quite taken with In Ah, although if he saw her as a romantic prospect or a fellow business executive Ryu couldn't tell. The uneasy feeling in his gut had only increased during the day and it did not abate when In Ah opened the door wearing a violet dress that made her look a bit like Audrey Hepburn.

"I did say I could go alone," she huffed. He had obviously not been forgiven yet.

"I have to talk to you," he said, which got her attention. "You can help," he whispered so quietly he could barely hear himself. But In Ah must have heard it, because her face lit up with a smile. "Distract him. Don't do anything else. Leave the rest to me."

"What rest?" she grilled him.

"Nothing. I just have to look for something, that's all. He has it hidden somewhere and I haven't been able to find it yet."

The prospect of helping him spy seemed to make her happier than even that of dating Kang Woo had when they first met. But then she suddenly stopped in her tracks. “Umm, who do you work for anyway? I mean really, not ...” she gestured in a way that meant absolutely nothing to him. “What with the ‘accident’ and all ... this isn’t going to be bad for South Korea, is it?”

Ryu had not expected that question, and so he just shook his head slowly before he could find the right words. “No. I can swear to it.”

A relieved sigh escaped her lips and the smile spread again. She practically flew down the stairs while Ryu followed her at a more sedate pace.

In the dining area of the suite, a table for two had been prepared and a nervous waiter stood next to a tray containing the dinner, while two bodyguards, Ryu included, made sure that nothing happened. Lee’s paranoia was based on reality, but the NIS had not sent the assassin he expected, which made Ryu’s job easier than it should be.

He watched as Lee greeted In Ah and the two chatted for a bit while the waiter served the soup and wine. So far, everything was going smoothly, but it was not yet time, so he listened with half an ear to the conversation.

“You are the daughter of Ju Hui Jang, are you not?” Lee asked suddenly. The memory of the last time he saw the man came to Ryu’s mind, although what he remembered most was how In Ah had thrown herself in front of him to protect him. Her grandfather hadn’t tried to get her out of harm’s way.

“No,” In Ah answered, “his granddaughter.”

“Really? I used to work with your grandfather a couple of times, you know? Of course, that was years ago, before he became embroiled in all that.”

Ryu watched as In Ah’s smile froze and she paused a moment, but then she caught herself and relaxed. “My grandfather worked with every businessman in Korea, it seems sometimes. They all know him and compare me to him.”

The conversation continued, the soup was placed on the tray, the wine glasses emptied and the waiter served the steak with trepidation before he was finally dismissed with the wave of a hand. He seemed anxious to leave, more anxious than he should be. Ryu ached to follow him to find out more, but that would rob him of his chance to search the room.

The other bodyguard didn’t seem to have noticed and yawned before he set out to patrol the hallway, leaving the safety of Lee to Ryu, who acknowledged it with a nod. He had barely closed the door when Ryu slowly inched closer to the bedroom door,

where Lee spent most of his time alone, and which none of them were permitted to enter. He felt In Ah's eyes on him and hoped she was being subtle, but Lee simply prattled on while Ryu slowly opened the door, slid through and pulled it almost close.

He had only seen glimpses of it so far. Lee kept it scrupulously in order, which meant he had to be careful when he moved something. He started with the desk in the corner, the most obvious place for a metal case with a chip, but the drawers were empty. Next, he went over to the wardrobe and searched the suitcases. Lee travelled with three of them, containing various suits and shirts – now on the hangers – and some notebooks, none of which served as a disguise for the chip casing. He found a concealed gun when he looked for a secret compartment, but nothing else.

Ryu was about to start on the drawers when a sudden noise interrupted. Someone had opened the door to the suite, and he could hear agitated murmurs through the slit in the door. He recognized the voice of one of the other guards – Lee Shin. His heart beat faster and he wondered if In Ah was alright.

“I caught him one floor down.” Ryu strained to understand the muffled voice. “He was talking on his phone and saying something about planting a bug.”

Chair legs moved over floor tiles, followed by Lee Gang Min's sharp voice: “Is that so?”

A man begged, pleaded his innocence, then the door opened again and a couple of people walked through. Ryu opened the bedroom door a fraction more and could see the other bodyguards crowding around the waiter, who was sporting a bloody lip and a fresh bruise on his forehead.

“Found it,” Lee Shin declared triumphantly. Ryu could not see him, nor could he see Lee as he ordered: “Excellent. Why don't you escort this man downstairs where he can wait for the police? Choi can take your post.”

Deafening silence echoed through the suite as Ryu realised he had been caught.

“Where is Choi?” asked Lee tersely, but nobody answered. “Did you see anything?”

The question was evidently meant for In Ah, as it was she who answered: “No, I didn't pay any attention to him at all.” Her voice sounded flat and shook with fear.

“Bring this one downstairs, Lee. The rest of you: look for Choi; he must be around here somewhere.”

A mad shuffling began as the waiter was led out by Lee Shin and the others busied themselves looking for him. He hoped they would clear the room but just as Lee Gang Min started to apologize to In Ah, someone said: “The bedroom.”

The door was wrenched open. Ryu grabbed the first person he could and scored a well placed punch in the temple. The man crumpled to the floor, but before he could take out another one someone said, “Not another step,” and Ryu found himself face to face with the barrel of a gun.

While he slowly raised his hands he surveyed the room. The dining table looked less neat, Lee stared at him with open hatred and the other three guards carefully spread out evenly around him. In Ah watched all this with horror in her wide eyes from the other side of the table.

“Now what is this?” Lee Gang Min sneered. “One of my own men betraying me? I suppose it is a lucky coincidence someone tried to plant a bug this evening. Take him out!” he barked.

Seconds later his arms were grabbed by two of the guards while the other still held the gun. “And find out who he works for,” Lee added, before he vanished in the bedroom. What happened then Ryu couldn’t see because the two men dragged him towards the door, while the third followed with the gun aimed at his back. Ryu frantically searched for an opening that would allow him to be break free, but the men were well trained and knew who they were dealing with.

“No funny business,” one of them growled into his ear. The statement was punctuated by a stab with the gun.

From the bedroom, the sharp sound of something shattering echoed through the suite, followed by a hollow thud. This was his opening. On instinct Ryu rammed his shoulder into one of his captors and robbed him of his balance, while his newly freed arm grabbed for the gun. Two shots went off before he fully freed it of the second guard’s grip, but none of them hit him, so Ryu didn’t care. He swirled around and fired twice in the direction of the last man who still held onto him.

The third guard dropped to the floor, so he must have hit, but the other two were trying for his legs. One hit the back of his knee and Ryu fell. He brought his other hand to the gun and rolled onto his back, shooting the first man he saw. The last guard scrambled out of range, holding up his hands as if to protect himself from bullets. Ryu had won. He hit the last man in the head with the butt of the gun and breathed shakily.

His body was shivering with adrenaline, he was sweating and his heart would not calm until he had assured himself that the guards were no longer a threat. Then he looked up and saw In Ah standing in the doorway to the bedroom, looking ashen and holding a metal case the size of a book.

“Found it,” she choked out feebly, while Ryu struggled to his feet.

“How?” he croaked, despite that being the last thing he cared about.

“He walked to the bedroom and looked for something under the mattress. When he found it, I just grabbed the clock on the bedside table and hit him over the head with it. They forgot all about me,” In Ah told him in an amazed tone. She didn’t seem to believe a word of what she was saying.

“The mattress ...” he murmured.

The next thing he knew, In Ah ran into his arms and clung to him with a strength he didn’t know she possessed. He almost lost his balance, but she didn’t notice. She was sobbing now and he felt her tears through his shirt. His arms encircled her before he knew what he was doing. He knew he should keep her at a distance, for her own sake, but in this moment he couldn’t even imagine letting go.



Ryu ended up carrying her out of Lee Gang Min’s suite. In Ah was still holding the case with the chip, but she had calmed down considerably and kept dangling her feet. When he dropped her on her sofa she sighed and curled up. He hated to leave her like this, but he had to check in, so he walked out onto the balcony and took out his phone.

“I’ve got it,” he said when Agent Yu picked up the phone. “But there was a complication.”

“Complication?”

“Another party tried to plant a bug and I was caught in the process. Two bodyguards dead, another two injured, and Lee as well.”

Yu paused. “We’ll send someone for the merchandise, take care,” she muttered tiredly, and hung up.

Relieved, Ryu took a deep breath and looked at the skyline of Singapore. The lights twinkled in the water under a dark blue sky and you couldn’t tell where land ended and the sea began. It felt peaceful.

“Is your boss happy?”

Ryu turned around and saw that In Ah had joined him. She still shivered and walked barefoot. The violet dress looked as good on her as it had half a lifetime ago. He nodded.

“Good. Because I am never doing anything like that ever again. And I’ll make sure to stay away from that man.” In Ah nodded emphatically. A grin tugged at his lips. She walked up to him and he noticed her hair was moving slightly in the nightly breeze. “We met here for the first time, remember?”

Ryu did. He hadn’t noticed her at all back then. It had probably been fate. She took his hand and he let it happen. They stood there for a long time, watching life going on beneath them. And for the first time, Ryu didn’t feel like he was alone when in the company of others. He mourned the loss of her warmth when she released his hand, but then she surprised him by laying the other on his cheek. She turned his head just far enough to press her lips against his for a fleeting moment.

“Don’t ever vanish again,” she whispered against his ear before she kissed him again.

Fin

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Beta read by Teyke